

Dear Friends,

I went to see the Yiddish language production of “Fiddler on the Roof” at the Museum of American Jewish Heritage a few weeks ago. The first act closer in which Tzeitel and Motel’s wedding celebration is abruptly ended by Cossacks overturning tables, splitting open down pillows, and stomping on silver candlesticks always tears at my heart as it did that night. I could not have imagined then that just a week later I would be in Philadelphia celebrating my daughter, Ruthie’s, engagement in the shadow of the massacre at the Tree of Life shul center in Pittsburgh.

Though “Fiddler” is set in late nineteenth century Russia, Pittsburgh proves that anti-Semitism is alive and well in contemporary America. The slaughter of the eleven because they were Jews demonstrates that Jews are, as we have been, targets of hatred. Indeed, anti-Semitism is both universal and trans-historical. Ever since the Roman conquest of Israel and the consequent dispersion of the Jewish People throughout the world, we have been a global people who have been suspect in the eyes of our host countries. That suspicion and its concomitant hatred grew in a new way with the establishment of the State of Israel and the ascendancy of Jewish national power. As a consequence, contemporary anti-Semitism now comes from the Right and from the Left.

Suspicion and hatred translated into violence last Shabbat in the form of the worst single attack against Jews in the history of America – America where our ancestors fled to find a safe haven for themselves and for their families. But can we equate the pogrom of the fictional Anatevka with the slaughter in Pittsburgh? I think not. The pogroms in Eastern Europe were state sponsored; their Jewish victims were powerless and without advocacy. In the United States, Jews are protected by laws that are enforced by civil and police agencies, and we are supported by other religious communities in ways that could not have been imaged by our great-grandparents. At the vigil at the Islamic Center the night after the solidarity service at our synagogue, for example, mosque leaders offered to patrol our grounds and serve guard during Shabbat services for as long as we needed them.

There is no question that the vituperative rhetoric that has come from the White House has contributed to the hateful words and actions in the last two years. It is clear, too, that the seeds of prejudice and hatred were planted millennia before the founding of our nation. It is also true that unlike our Eastern Europe forbearers, we live under a government that is pledged to secure the safety of all our nation’s inhabitants regardless of religion, race or gender. In all this we should find comfort.

But comfort must not eclipse vigilance. With the Pittsburgh slaughter, we have come to a new point in the history of the Jews of America. We now know that we can no longer take our lives as Jews for granted even in this land that has long been a haven for us. And we know, too, that good people will stand with us. Our task, even in the shadow of death, is to look to life and to live the best lives we can. This is way of our People. This has always been the Jewish way.

Still with hope,  
*Lee*